

MISTAKES IN QUESTION PAPERS FOR GRADE VI IN BANGLADESH: AN OVERLOOKED ISSUE IN GENERAL

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ABSTRACT

The paper intends to investigate the generally overlooked mistakes in the question papers of English I Paper for Grade VI in Bangladesh. The question papers were collected from seven out of 64 districts of the country. The total number of schools of these seven districts is 1567 out of which 121 were randomly selected for this study. The number of students studying in Grade VI in these schools is around 20086. All the questions were categorized and analyzed from the curriculum point of view. The study finds that on an average the question papers are laden with mistakes. The paper investigates the reasons for these mistakes and suggests some proposals to overcome these issues.

KEYWORDS: *Question Paper, Testing, Test Items, Mistakes, Teachers & Bangladesh*

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INTRODUCTION

According to Handique (2014), examinations have always played a vital role in the educational process throughout the world. It is a normal practice that examinations, are designed and administered at different stages of education by the certifying authority. On the basis of the results of these examinations students are graded, selected for admission to higher education, given scholarships and last but not the least, shortlisted for job interviews and the like. Apart from these traditional outcomes of the results of examinations, examinations can also be a good indicator of teaching scenarios in a country that may provide the academicians with a good insight into the fields of improvement in learning and teaching procedure and supply guidance for future.

So far particularly Bangladesh is concerned; written examination is the only means of assessing students' capability till higher secondary examination. Though of late tertiary level examinations have undergone a major shift from cent percent written examination to a notable proportion to practical or thesis based evaluation of students, things have remained almost the same in primary to higher secondary level. For assessing the students of primary to higher secondary level a very negligible amount of marks is allotted for the practical demonstration of subject knowledge or sometimes students are to submit written assignments. So, these written examinations are the most commonly used technique designed and organized by schools in each subject for the evaluation of student's scholastic achievement.

Since written examinations are the major instrument of evaluating students, setting question papers should be administered very carefully. But unfortunately, it is usual for a teacher to prepare a test by assembling questions without taking into consideration the characteristics of a good test. If proper care is not taken the examination itself will be a poor measuring instrument. So long as examinations assess students' ability to remember and recall textbook knowledge, all attempts to redirect the curriculum towards learning will be thwarted. First of all, tests in

knowledge-based subject areas should gauge what students have learned, and their ability to use this knowledge for problem-solving and application in the real world. Besides, examinations should be focused to test the thinking processes of students, their ability to find new information and use them and to analyze and evaluate the same. The questions of the written examination need to go beyond the textbook.

As the researcher set for the research on this particular field of study, he came to know that no such research has ever been conducted with any level of students in Bangladesh. After much thinking the researcher decided to study English I paper question papers of class six. Since class six is the beginning of secondary education in Bangladesh, the study of question papers at this level should give us a clear idea of the current practice in this level and the research might come up with some valuable suggestions for the improvement of teaching-learning system at this level.

OBJECTIVE

The purpose of the post-examination activity of analyzing question papers and marking scheme is to see if something is amiss so as to prevent the repetitions of errors in future. The errors in the question papers may be as follows:

- The language of questions is grammatically incorrect
- Mistakes with proper usage of punctuation and capitalization
- The questions are mostly copied exactly from the textbooks – not from beyond the textbooks
- Instructions are vague, inappropriate and inadequate
- Level of difficulty is not appropriate: either too high or too low
- Marking scheme not properly designed – left to the discretion of examiners, value points not fully given, etc.

The Objectives of the Study, Therefore, Were to Find Out Whether

- The questions are grammatically correct
- There are any mistakes with punctuation and capitalization
- The question papers have appropriate difficulty level catering to different capabilities of all kinds of students
- The marking scheme has been designed properly in order to have uniformity in scoring
- Appropriate marks were allotted to different questions
- To provide suggestive measures to improve the question papers

Delimitations of the Study

The study has the following limitations:

- The study is delimited to the analysis of the question papers of English I paper of class six.
- The study analyzes the question papers of half-yearly examinations of 2017 only.
- The study analyzes the question papers of about 121 schools under Secondary and Higher Secondary Education Division, Chittagong zone only.

- Since only the question papers of half-yearly examinations of 2017 are analyzed, we cannot determine the repetition of same questions which is often considered to be a major issue encouraging students to rote learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

During the last thirty years, there have been many important theoretical and methodological developments in the field of evaluation. In spite of its progress, still there are many major problems faced by this field such as "unlike medicine, evaluation is not a discipline that has been developed by practicing professionals over thousands of years, so we are not yet at the stage where we have huge encyclopedias that will walk us through any evaluation step-by-step", or provide a clear definition of what evaluation entails (Davidson, 2005). Desheng and Varghese (2013) defined evaluation as the comparison of actual (project) impacts against the agreed strategic plans. According to them, evaluation looks at the original objectives, at what was accomplished, and how it was accomplished.

Ingram (1974:313) is of the view that "tests, like examinations, invite candidates to display their knowledge or skills in a concentrated fashion, so that the result can be graded, and inferences made from the standard of performance that can be expected from the candidate, either at the time of the test or at some future time". A test is conducted to measure the knowledge of an individual and to compare him with other individuals who belong to the same group.

According to Carrol (1965: 364), "the purpose of testing is always to render information to aid in making intelligent decisions about possible courses of action. Sometimes these decisions affect only the future design or use of the tests themselves, in which case we are dealing with solely experimental uses of tests. Sometimes the decisions have to do with the retention or alteration of courses of training, as when one decides that poor tests results are due to ineffective training".

Pit Corder (1973:351) is of the view that "language tests are measuring instruments and they are applied to learners, not to the teaching materials or teachers. For this reason, they do not tell us 'directly' about the contribution of the 'teacher' or the 'materials' to the learning process. They are designed to measure the learners 'knowledge of' or 'competence' in the language at the particular moment in his course and nothing else. The knowledge of one pupil may be compared with the knowledge of others or with that of the same pupil at a different time, or with same standard or norm, as in the case of height, weight, temperature etc."

According to Halliday, et al., (1966:215), "tests are an attempt to construct an instrument for measuring attainment, or progress, or ability in language skills."

Thus, testing is a set of techniques of questioning and observing to find out how far learning is taking place, whether the students are following the teacher or instructor, and finding out the problems of the students. It is also used to assess the knowledge of the students in order to compare one individual to another individual in the same group.

According to Rahman &Gautam(2012), "the term evaluation in modern educational practice is used for 'tests' and 'examination'. It is a general term that covers both. It is a much more comprehensive term than either test or examination. The term test refers to the measurement of the competence of the learners with reference to the particular area of knowledge, whereas the term examination refers to the particular standard that is to be achieved by the learner after a particular level."

According to Alabi and Babatunde (2001) there are three purposes of language tests: i) to determine how much has been learned from a particular syllabus; ii) to determine the strength and weaknesses found in students' language; and iii) to enable the teacher to understand other types of tests.

There are certain qualities expected of a good language test. These are the characteristics of a good language test. They include, among others, validity, reliability, objectivity, and economy.

From the above discussion, it can be said that the importance of testing is enormous. A test as in the form of a written examination involving question papers set by the teachers is at times the only yardstick to evaluate students. So, it is expected that genuine care should be taken in doing such an important task. No margin of error is anticipated in writing a question paper which is considered to be a written document from the school authority. Testing and evaluation in the English language in the secondary schools are expected to be based on the content of the curriculum obtained in the syllabus.

METHODOLOGY

This paper intends to investigate whether there are mistakes in the question papers of English I Paper for Grade VI in Bangladesh. To this end, question papers were collected from seven districts of the country. The total number of schools of these seven districts is 1567 out of which 121 were randomly selected for this study. The number of students studying in Grade VI in these schools is around 20086. All the questions were categorized and analyzed from the curriculum point of view. First of all, sentences and words of the all the questions were counted. Then each of these question paper was manually checked for mistakes with article, capitalization, lexicon, number, preposition, punctuation, grammar and question. Later all these were put on a chart and averaged. The schools which used the same question were put in the same category and their question code names were noted down. Afterwards, each test item of the proposed question pattern of the curriculum was compared to the practiced test item of 121 question papers. Finally, the frequency of test items was counted to see whether guessing might lead to rote learning by students.

Analysis of the Question Paper

The following tables (National Curriculum, 2012) give the detailed mark distribution of class six English first paper.

Table 1

Distribution of Marks (Paper One)	Marks
Listening	10
Speaking	10
Reading	40
Writing	40
Total	100

Table 2

Skills	Total Marks	Test Items (All Items Should be Used in the Test)	Notes
Listening	10	MCQ gap filling	Test items must be developed by question setters
Speaking	10	describing / narrating answering questions based on routine/social expressions family, school, home city/village, books, games and sports, movie/TV show, recent events and incidents etc.	Five to ten sentences used coherently with acceptable English with understandable pronunciation
Reading	40	MCQ answering questions (open ended and close ended questions) gap filling with/without clues substitution tables information transfer Rearranging Summarizing	* Text or test items should not be taken directly from the textbooks. Test items should be designed within contexts similar to textbook contents.
Writing	40	writing paragraph answering questions/completing a story writing formal/informal letters writing compositions on personal experience and familiar topics, recent events/incidents, emails, CV	*Completing story should not be given as a test item for classes 6 and 7.

However, as the researcher went through the 121 school question papers, he came across some anomaly between the proposed question pattern and reality. The practiced question pattern is discussed below:

Reading Part

- Question number 1 is supposed to measure students' range of vocabulary within a context similar to textbook contents. 10 multiple choice questions each carrying worth half a mark totaling to 5 marks are set from a given passage which should not be taken directly from the textbook.
- In question number 2 students have to answer five open ended and close ended questions based on a second passage. Here each question carries 2 marks totaling to 10 marks. This test item is set to measure students' cognitive comprehensibility of the passage and answer accordingly.
- Question number 3 asks students' to transfer information from the second passage, but the researchers found that often there was the third passage. This test item intends to measure students' ability to find out the given information in the text.
- Question number 4 is an extension of question number 3. Here five statements are given which the students have to identify as true or false after reading the given passage. This test item measures students' ability to comprehend a text using their cognitive skill and separate fact from fiction.
- In this question, students have to fill in the gaps with clues or without clues. This test item measures students' cognitive ability to comprehend the text and fill in the gaps with probable grammatical or lexical changes to suit the needs of the sentences. There are usually 10 gaps each worth half a mark totaling to 5 marks.
- Question number 6 asks students to match the text in three columns. The substitution table test item measures students' cognitive ability of subject-verb and subject-predicate agreement. The students have to write five

meaningful sentences from the substitution table worth 5 marks.

- The last test item, of reading part is rearranging. In this test item students have to rearrange ten sentences in chronological order to make it a continuous story or narration. It carries 5 marks and is meant to measure students' ability to follow the continuous flow of thought or incidents.

Writing Part

- In this test item, students have to complete an incomplete story. This test item carries five marks and intends to measure students' ability to write on the basis of some given clue and complete a writing task with a rational ending.
- Question number 9 asks students to write a letter/application or an e-mail on a given situation. This test item carries 10 marks and intends to measure students' ability to write a letter/application or an e-mail maintaining the basic structure along with grammatically correct sentences and proper punctuation marks.
- Question number 10 asks students to write a dialogue on the basis of a given situation. This test item carries 10 marks and intends to measure students' ability to move the given situation forward, to give and ask information, and to contribute to characterization.
- In the last test item of writing part students have to write a paragraph by giving an answer to a number of questions. This guided writing carries 10 marks and intends to measure students' ability to write grammatically correct sentences with the logical development of thought focusing on a single idea.
- Speaking test carries 10 marks and intends to measure students' ability to (i) use English sounds appropriate, (ii) use word stress and stress on words in sentences, (iii) use intonation in sentences properly, (iv) talks about people, places and familiar objects in short and simple sentences, (v) ask and answer questions, (vi). participate in short dialogues and conversations on familiar topics.
- Listening test carries 10 marks and intends to measure students' ability to (i) follow instructions, commands, requests and act accordingly, (ii) recognize English sounds, (iii) ii. recognize word stress and stress on words in sentences, (iv) recognize intonation in sentences, (v) understand and enjoy stories and poems.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

After a detailed analysis of the question papers of English first paper of class six of 121 schools, the researcher came across the following findings. On an average, each question contains 112.34 sentences and 1171.34 words. Though the individual question has different types of mistakes, on an average each question has 6.23 lexical mistakes. Even though most of this mistake can be attributed to typographical mistakes, some school question papers seemed to be lacking awareness of proofreading completely. The second most frequently occurring mistake was capitalization. This is one of the basic components of writing which is expected from students. However, unfortunately, this basic thing is overlooked in question papers which are considered to be the most standard printed document from the school authority. Mistakes with punctuation stood third with an average of 3.99 per question. It must be mentioned that in English second paper 5 marks are allotted to the appropriate use of capitalization and punctuation. When the question papers are full of capitalization and punctuation mistakes, we shouldn't expect our students to master the appropriate use of these. With 1.74

mistakes per question, grammatical mistakes stood in 4th position. No grammatical mistake is accepted at any cost in any question paper. To our utter surprise, we came across a school with as many as five grammatical mistakes in a question paper of 110 sentences. Next in the line is a mistake with articles. On an average, there are 1.08 mistakes per question even though there are 5 marks allotted for appropriate use of articles in English second paper question. The sixth most frequently mistake was question itself. There are 0.84 mistakes with questions per question paper. A question paper asks questions to students, but if the very question is grammatically incorrect, the very standard of the question setter is questionable. Last but not the least there are mistakes with plural forms and preposition of 0.66 and 0.65 per question respectively.

The most surprising fact that dawned on the researchers is that though all schools were supposed to prepare their own question papers, some of the schools collected question papers from some common sources. As we interviewed some Thana Education Officers, we came to know that there are some associations of teachers in different regions. These associations prepare question papers for all classes and subjects regularly. They even print a code of the association in the question papers. The concerned headmasters of the schools who are willing to get prepared questions contact one of these associations and collect them for an amount of money. The cost varies according to the number of question papers and sets purchased. The schools that buy questions from the same association, follow the same schedule for examinations to avoid the question papers getting leaked. Often these associations have some political alignment. The headmasters also prefer buying question papers from the association to which s/he is prone to. By buying questions from a specific association, the headmasters also expect some favors in future if needed. However, these are not the only causes. Sometimes, preparing individual questions and printing them is too expensive compared to the number of students in the schools. Besides, often the headmasters try to avoid the troubles of assigning teachers in preparing and printing the question papers. Most of the understaffed schools opt to relieve themselves off the tedious task of preparing questions just in exchange for an amount of money. When asked, the Thana Education Officers also informed the researchers, that since a lot of money is involved in this business along with strong political back up and syndication, they are helpless in taking corrective actions and implementing the rule of each school preparing their own question papers. However, the carelessness of these associations in preparing standard question papers remains unanswered. The researchers found three question sets which were followed by thirty, twenty-nine and eleven schools respectively. Besides these, there were other question sets which were followed by several other schools.

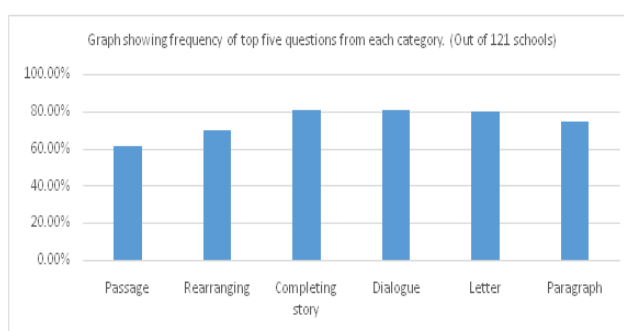


Figure 1

There are usually two passages from where different categories of questions are framed. So, there were 242 passages for 121 schools. In total there were 43 different passages out of which 23 were outside the textbook and 20 were from the text. But the top five frequent passages covered almost 62% of passages and only one of them was outside the text

through all the passages were supposed to be outside the text to evaluate the achievement of the learners. Whenever the questions are set from the text, there are possibilities of learners' memorizing by rote and securing better grades without really understanding the lessons.

There were 26 different rearranging questions. The top five frequent questions appeared in 85 schools which covered more than 70% of all rearranging questions.

There were just 14 different questions for completing a story, and the top five varieties covered 97 of them which is almost 81 percent of all the questions. It is interesting to note that completing a story "A farmer and his son" appeared in a different form as a rearranging question in 13 different schools.

Writing a dialogue had 17 different varieties. Of them, the top five appeared in 98 schools and they constitute almost 81% of dialogue writing questions.

Most of the 121 schools gave two options for letter writing, but others didn't. In total there were 194 letters, but there were just 19 different varieties. Of them, the top five questions appeared in 156 times which constitute more than 80 percent of the frequency.

For writing a paragraph there were 23 varieties of which top five paragraphs appeared 91 times constituting more than 74 percent of the frequency.

FINDINGS

Rearranging question is given from some common sources in almost all school question papers allowing students to memorize rather than understanding the method of rearranging. The prime focus of rearranging should be the use of connectors. Faruk and Barua (2016) pointed out that the tertiary level students of Bangladesh underuse connectors in their writing. This finding also justifies it. Even though students are tested for organizing the logical flow of thoughts through rearranging, they don't learn it properly because in most of the rearranging questions the use of connectors is nonexistent. For students rearranging is just memorizing some popular stories.

Like rearranging completing story is also taken from some popular short stories. The students are asked to use their own imagination to complete the story, but since the stories are from some common sources, they are left with no choice but to write down the memorized story in their answer script. The objective of this question is to challenge the students with an unknown situation and make them use their own imagination coupled with their writing skill to complete the story. However, the most surprising thing is that in the curriculum it is clearly mentioned that completing story should not be given as a test item for classes 6 and 7. Unfortunately, none of the 121 schools followed this instruction.

The use of appropriate punctuation mark and capitalization is tested for 5 marks. Unfortunately, the question papers are full of punctuation and capitalization errors. It has been found out that there are more mistakes than the allotted marks. If students count the number of mistakes with the allotted marks, they will be confused and might be discouraged to correct the mistakes.

Guided paragraph writing with questions tests a student's ability to write on any given topic. However, it is found out that the given questions often don't conform to the formula of paragraph writing. Not a single instance was found where the questions follow the logical flow of the development of a paragraph. There are no questions related to a topic sentence, developers or a terminator. The students are very much restricted by the questions provided. This model could

have been successfully exploited as a guiding tool to develop students' paragraph writing ability, but since they are given some random questions to answer, they develop a misconception of paragraph writing believing that a paragraph is a combination of 10 to 15 completely unrelated sentences on a given topic.

There are 20 marks allotted for listening and speaking test, but we found a number of schools don't allow any marks for these tests. Some of the school question papers just mentioned the marks and left no clue as to how to conduct the tests. On the other hand, a number of schools reflected these test clearly on the question paper. Unfortunately, the question papers that reflected the tests, were no more listening and speaking tests. Instead of arranging a listening test, a passage is given followed by some questions and students were asked to answer them after reading the passage. This ultimately became a reading test. Next, instead of arranging a speaking test, which is logistically easier than arranging a listening test, several questions were given and students were asked to write down the answers to them on exam script. This ultimately became a writing test. However, the most alarming issue is about the schools where the listening and speaking tests were not reflected at all. There are hardly any chances of conducting the tests maintaining a minimum standard. We interviewed some of the students who informed that there is hardly any arrangement for listening and speaking class. Besides, the marks allotted for the listening and speaking tests are graded at the English teacher's discretion.

A lot of compound words were written separately. For example, womenfolk, flyover, suitcase, lifestyle, newspaper, headmaster, birthday, joyful, whenever, football, towards, outlook, and afterwards. Among these, the particle "over" of the word "flyover" appeared in one of the fill in the blanks with appropriate questions. This instance proves that the question setter is completely unaware of the use of this compound word.

Problems related to clear instructions is also another issue. Sometimes the instructions were not clear enough but it is commonly understood that since the students are used to these types of questions most of the time they get away with this unintelligibility or it is understood that they get help from the exam invigilator regarding those issues. The researcher also came across 2 to 3 instances where students were instructed to fill in the blanks, but in reality, it was a matching task. These prove the utter carelessness on the part of the question setters. A quick glance while proofreading of the question is enough to avert this sort of gross mistake.

Apart from these, several other issues were noticed while analyzing the question papers. A lot of question papers didn't have the subject code. It must also be mentioned that mark distribution is not clearly mentioned in a number of question papers. Besides, the spacing is also a pressing issue as we noticed sometimes it was difficult to comprehend the message clearly because two words merged together for ignoring a space between them. Furthermore, most of the question setters seemed to be careless regarding the use of abbreviation. Finally, the question papers had a remarkable number of mistakes with the use of noun forms. There were a number of instances of the use of plural forms with uncountable nouns, and sometimes the plural forms went missing.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, it can be said that the standard of English I paper question papers for grade VI in Bangladesh is too poor. Even though proper guideline is there, it's not enough to enable teachers to prepare standard question papers. Proper training is a must before implementing the mandatory rule of each school preparing their own question papers. Financial incentives to print their own question papers can be an alternative to schools with limited students.

The adequate number of teachers should be ensured to all schools so that the teachers don't feel overburdened while setting question papers. Strict measures against the question paper business syndication have to be in place to fight this generally overlooked issue. Regular monitoring of all schools' question papers and awarding the best question setter by the Secondary and Higher Education Division might encourage the question setters to be more professional.

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